

High School Graduation Forums

Phoenix November 5, 2007
Tucson November 13, 2007
Flagstaff November 27, 2007

During the month of November three forums were held through out the state to gather information and feedback from classroom teachers and other interested educators. The forums were cosponsored by the Governor's P-20 Council, the Arizona Education Association and the Arizona K-12 Center/NAU. While these forums were originally designed to seek feedback primarily from classroom teachers, other educators, including counselors, school principals, district administrators and others attended.

The purpose and format of the forums was jointly established and each forum was represented by all three organizations. Participants were asked to provide feedback to the State Board and the P-20 Council on teachers' perspectives and ideas related to the proposed high school graduation requirements. They were shown a short power point of the actual current requirements and proposed changes, offered an opportunity to ask questions for clarification, and then asked to engage in discussion regarding critical barriers and unintended consequences as well as potential solutions. Teachers and counselors were grouped by Middle School and High School. All other participants were grouped separately. A copy of the materials is attached for your review.¹

Participants:

107	Total participants
73	Teachers/Counselors
34	Administrators/others
15	Observers from K-12 Center, Governor's office, SBOE, AEA
	Demographics
31	School districts
4	Charter Schools
3	Universities
2	County Offices
2	Community Colleges
1	Tribal official
5	ADE staff

The sample included mostly high school teachers in the math and science disciplines, though counselors and some other subjects were represented as well. There was one group of middle school teachers at each forum. The Flagstaff forum is the only one that had more administrators/others than teachers as a result of the County Superintendent inviting all Superintendents in the County to attend. The cross section of districts was representative of the state, with perhaps an over sampling of rural and small districts. Unified districts were far more likely to participate than the Union districts, especially in Phoenix, though there was some representation from the High School districts. A complete list of the school districts is attached as well.²

¹ PowerPoint presentation, current and new requirements, Facilitated Questions and Feedback form

² Attached list of school districts and entities participating

Findings and Conclusions

These findings are overall trends and patterns in the feedback that was presented. No attempt was made to differentiate between groups except where there were distinct differences in perspective.

What are your general impressions of the proposed changes?

The participants appear to be fairly supportive, with very few outright comments that indicate they are against the changes. Still many of the participants felt that the decision to change the requirements was already a “done deal,” and an unfunded mandate. At every forum there were comments of support about raising expectations and preparing students for the future, but all were tempered with real concerns and frustrations about implementation of the requirements, especially in the areas of finding HQ teachers or HQ requirements for existing teachers, CTE/elective courses, and potential failure and struggle of students with higher level math (Algebra I-II) as a mandate.

In general, teachers are more likely to be generally supportive of the changes but frustrated and uncertain about implementation and the effect on students and teachers. Administrators/others tend to be more conditionally supportive or against the changes and indicate that a lack of resources (financial and personnel) will increase failure in the system, making this an impractical policy change.

Identify critical barriers that currently exist or may be the unintended consequences of implementing these changes.

For students:

The number one implication across all groups was an increase in the failure rate and/or drop out rate for students, particularly as a result of the Algebra I/II requirements and what they see as a lack of real flexibility to meet higher math standards. They feel like all kids will be tracked into a college bound cycle and many will lose electives that provide them with options and choices that often keep them in school. They believe there is a lack of value and recognition of CTE coursework and those programs will be lost. This is especially true for the Vocational-Technical Districts, eliminating one whole set of options for students who are not intending on going to college. Teachers feel that many students are struggling with the current requirements, especially in the rural areas, and this will only add to the difficulties. There is a great deal of concern about special education and ELL students, and these requirements are seen as particularly damaging to those populations. ELL students will potentially be blocked from any electives given the requirements of the new ELL models. Electives are clearly seen as important to a student’s overall education and motivation to stay in school, and these new requirements do not appear to value that notion.

For Teachers:

Teachers and administrators/others saw the lack of Highly Qualified teachers as a key issue, though their perspectives on the issue differed. Teachers tended to note issues related to becoming or being Highly Qualified if you are teaching classes that count for math and science. They also note the need for professional development in the content areas, from elementary through high school. Administrators tended to define this issue more in terms of a shortage of available personnel to fill positions. All groups talked about the loss or displacement of elective/CTE teachers. Other common concerns were

time for remediation for students who are failing, pressure to pass kids to reduce failure rates, and the cost to teachers to become Highly Qualified or retrained to meet these requirements, and the potential increase in class size.

For Districts:

Two issues were consistently mentioned across all groups, the need for both Highly Qualified and certified teachers and funding to support teachers, classroom space, lab space, materials and supplies, remediation and professional development. The loss of electives and the resulting potential need for changes in scheduling; both of the day and the year were also mentioned. The need to focus on standards rather than a particular course (Algebra II) and overall concerns about the difficulty of implementing multiple personal curriculums, and differentiated courses to meet the math and science requirements appears unmanageable to a number of the groups. In most of these categories the administrators/others were more apt to mention structural issues or funding, and the teachers more apt to discuss the loss of electives and the disconnect they see between the Alg II requirements and the math standards and the AIMS/Science requirement and the current testing cycle.

Identify constructive solutions or suggestions to enhance classroom teaching and learning and best prepare students to meet increased requirements

In this section, participants were asked to choose their top three items and construct solutions for them. Many of these are implementation issues and would fall to individual school districts to create and manage. There are several policy implications and they fall into two categories; those directly related to the recommendations themselves, and those seen as critical to supporting the implementation of the recommendations. In general, the vast majority of participants in these forums do not believe this effort will be successful without state policy level support, and many feel that without it, the failure rates and achievement gaps will only worsen.

Policy issues related to the recommendations

- Do not require courses called Algebra I/Algebra II for all students. The use of more consistent, standards based language in the rule may eliminate this issue. When people see these titles they immediately think all students are going to be required to take the same classes in the same progression.
- Create mandatory tutoring/intervention for students who are not meeting benchmarks at earlier grades and/or who fail courses. There is a strong sense that intervention cannot be up to individual choice and that just causing students to take classes that they have failed again the next semester will only compound the difficulties and increase student drop out rates.
- Create more flexibility in the Regents Diploma so that more classes will count in the math/science requirement. Many of the CTE students are college bound and the current requirements would not allow them to qualify. This is seen as creating a tracking system and an “elitist” diploma.

Policy issues related to support of the recommendations

- ADE should clearly define the processes for becoming Highly Qualified if you are teaching multiple subjects and allow for maximum flexibility to meet those requirements within the parameters of NCLB.
- Support and champion long-term funding of public education that will sustain these kinds of changes and the associated costs; buildings, classrooms, labs,

materials, supplies, professional development and retraining, competitive salaries, and student intervention/tutoring.

- Provide incentives for veteran teachers in shortage areas to stay in teaching rather than to retire early and leave. This has policy implications at both the local and the state (ASRS level).

Specific solutions by category are summarized below into main themes. The detail of these can be found in the commentary taken from the group worksheets.³ Many of these have both implementation and policy implications. Some can be done locally, but in almost all cases, leadership and support will be needed to make them a reality.

For students:

- Provide options for students to meet these credit requirements by creating new elective courses that focus on math/science, explicitly delineating math/science skills taught in elective courses and CTE and allow for applied coursework in math/science.
- Allow for transportation to tutoring and create opportunities for students to be better prepared when they come to high school.
- Create more flexible schedules; morning, late afternoon/evening, Saturday, on-line courses, and a virtual high school.

For Teachers:

- Provide increases in teacher pay, explore performance and other incentives and market driven strategies.
- Make it easier for teachers to be Highly Qualified in more areas.
- Encourage existing teachers to become both Highly Qualified and certified in math and science and pay for coursework and tests.
- Provide quality, relevant math and science professional development to ALL teachers , including elementary and middle school teachers.

For Districts/State:

- Provide flexible scheduling and more distance learning.
- Pass local and state bond issues, make changes in the SFB funding formula, pass a statewide referendum, keep the county equalization tax, create an overall increase in state funding, revise the school funding formula, create a dedicated funding source for public education.
- Develop an electronic version of AIMS to use in fall/spring as benchmark scores, review standards and assessments for math/science and make consistent with requirements.
- Create new and different business partnerships to support math/science requirements with money, space, and equipment.

Summary Conclusions

The Forums were well received by teachers and practitioners. They felt the opportunity gave them a voice in this major policy initiative. Many of the participants found the information helpful and the clarity about current and proposed requirements very informative. There is a great deal more frustration and concern about the support necessary to assure that students are successful than there is about the actual requirements themselves. Teachers and other educators seem to realize intuitively that

³ Facilitated Questions and Feedback by Forum Group

just requiring more math and science without careful implementation and support will not yield the desired result and may in fact impede it. The need to teach ALL students to a higher and more rigorous standard is a common goal. The tension comes when it appears that the structure and requirements to meet that goal are not flexible enough for students that legitimately want to pursue interests and careers other than a four-year University degree. Any course requirements and graduation policy will need to strike that balance.